

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

Monday 21st December

Good Morning,

At the weekend newspapers ran the headline that politically correct universities were killing free speech. The latest casualty is the statue of Cecil Rhodes one of the founding fathers of colonial South Africa. Objectors want to topple him from his plinth at Oriel College Oxford.

The campus of our universities are coming under pressure from two directions. From below, activists with the blow torch of social media are trying to expel anyone who digresses from their own convictions. From above, there's new legislation to restrict proselytising by extremists.

To some people the campus no longer feels like the wide open field of ideas, but hedged about with wary caution as to what can be said in public.

I remember as a student once queuing to get into the Great Hall of the University. The speaker? Enoch Powell. He'd just given his controversial 'River Tiber' speech about immigration. The fact that he was allowed onto the campus to air his views did not stop Britain becoming a diverse society. But his views could be heard, debated and either accepted or rejected.

But although freedom is a virtue it's not an absolute. We're not free to lie and kill. There are laws to limit that. In the end, it's not freedom that characterises a nation. It's the way we qualify our freedom that defines us.

At the birth of Christianity they were often ordered by the Courts under penalty of death not to share their beliefs in the Resurrection of Jesus. The courageous ones refused.

In the Acts of the Apostles, that record their martyrdom, we're told they carried on preaching 'with boldness'. The little word used here and repeatedly was taken from classical Greek. *Parresia*. It meant, 'freedom of speech'. The Disciples of Christ claimed a God-given freedom to tell out the truth; and not just what they believed, but what they had seen and heard and forensically touched with their own hands.

We even hear echoes of this today when people stand up in court and swear by Almighty God to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth.

Here we see vestiges of the Christian faith that has had a hand in shaping and qualifying our freedoms and responsibilities, our laws and our liberty.

And at Christmas, it's not a bad time to say grace for what has been given in the past, for there's no knowing how much longer we will have it in the future.

The Right Reverend James Jones